The U.S. Department of Defense is currently commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Korean War, which lasted from 1950-1953, by honoring veterans and their families with events and ceremonies that began in June 2000 and will last through November 2003.

Aviation Engineer Contributions to the Air War in Korea

A KOREAN WAR RETROSPECTIVE

by Don K. Tomajan III

This article is based on research conducted for a presentation to the Korean War Air Power Symposium sponsored by Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) in Honolulu, HI, in June 2001. The symposium's purpose was to feature personal accounts of those who served in Korea whose jobs covered all aspects of the air war. My role was to discuss the contributions of the aviation engineer units that were responsible for upgrading and building air bases. By the war's end, 10 Engineer Aviation Battalions had served in Korea, working on more than 50 airfields, including some in North Korea.

Creation of SCARWAF

The Air Force did not automatically have a full-fledged civil engineer force when it became a separate service in 1947. The Directorate of Air Installations was established in Washington, DC in October 1947. On each Air Force base a handful of air installation officers, all of whom had transferred to the Air Force from the Army and many of whom had served with the Army Corps of Engineers in World War II, directed the maintenance and repair of base facilities and provided fire protection and aircraft crash rescue. At most bases, those missions were accomplished by a largely civilian workforce.

Providing civil engineer support to the newly created Air Force raised two questions: what organization would perform contract construction for the Air Force, and what would be the status of the Engineer Aviation Battalions (EABs) that had performed combat construction during World War II. The Department of Defense designated the Army as the construction agent for the Air Force, and construction projects on air bases continued to be programmed and managed by the Army Corps of Engineers. To perform combat engineering support, an agreement was reached whereby the Army would organize, staff and train units placed under Air Force operational control for the exclusive support of the USAF mission. Those battalions were designated Special Category Army with Air Force — SCARWAF.

An Ill-Equipped Force

Aviation Engineer units had been allowed to atrophy following World War II and were ill-prepared for war in Korea. When war broke out on June 25, 1950, battalion commanders estimated SCARWAF battalion combat effectiveness averaged 10 to 15 percent of the capabilities of the same units in World War II. Many assigned to SCARWAF felt their units were "neither fish nor fowl," with neither the Army nor the Air Force taking full responsibility for maintaining an effective force structure. The Army failed to send trained replacements in adequate numbers to maintain the skill levels required to perform assigned missions, and the Air Force failed to institute an efficient chain of command and organizational structure to maximize the effectiveness of SCARWAF units.

Two SCARWAF groups subordinate to Far East Air Forces (FEAF) were available to support operations in Korea at the beginning of the conflict. The 930th Engineer Aviation Group (EAG) Headquarters and Service Company, assigned to Fifth Air Force, directed construction by civilian contractors at Nagoya, Japan. The 931st EAG, assigned to Twentieth Air Force, had four EABs on Okinawa (802nd, 808th, 822nd and 839th) and one on Guam (811th). These units were manned at only slightly more than half their authorized strength. They were hardly

SCARWAF INSIGNIA

It was not until October 1952 that the Department of the Army approved a distinctive shoulder sleeve insignia to be worn by Army personnel in SCARWAF units. The design used the engineer red and white colors and featured a winged sword on a solid red shield.

Talking Numbers

Korean base names were unusual and unfamiliar to the multi-national pilots who flew missions over Korea. To avoid confusion and miscommunication, Far East Air Forces adopted a numbering system for Korean bases. Some bases became better known by their number than by their name. The more important of these airfields included:

K-1 ..... Pusan West	K-8 ..... Kunsan	K-24 ..... Pyongyang East
K-2 ..... Taegu #1	K-9 ..... Pusan East	K-27 ..... Yonpo
K-3 ..... Pohang	K-10 ..... Chinhae	K-37 ..... Taegu #2
K-4 ..... Sachon	K-13 ..... Suwon	K-46 ..... Hoengsong
K-5 ..... Taejon	K-14 ..... Kimpo	K-47 ..... Chunchon
K-6 ..... Pyongtaek	K-16 ..... Seoul	K-55 ..... Osan
K-7 ..... Kwangju	K-23 ..... Pyongyang	

Repair and maintenance of pierced steel planking was a constant job on Korean airfields that saw up to 10,000 takeoffs and landings per month. *(All photos USAF unless otherwise noted)*

equipped to perform the battalion-size heavy construction and repair jobs that would be expected of them to upgrade Korean airfields and build new bases.

SCARWAF Units Deploy to Korea

At the outbreak of hostilities, most Korean airfields were unsuitable for sustained USAF operations. Most runways in Korea were short (less than 5,000 feet) and had generally the same sod or gravel surfaces used by the Japanese during World War II. The South Koreans had kept only a few of these fields in use. Suwon (K-13) and Kimpo (K-14) were the only airfields suited for high performance aircraft. Kimpo had been improved during the American occupation, starting in 1945, and was the most modern Korean airfield. Suwon had a 4,900-foot concrete runway and adjacent air facilities. The initial, high-priority mission of SCARWAF units would be to improve existing air bases to handle the more powerful and capable post-World War II aircraft.

There was no Aviation Engineer unit and no USAF tactical air unit based in Korea when the war started and no adequate base infrastructure to support moving troops from Japan and Okinawa. The first deployment of Aviation Engineers to Korea was an emergency deployment in July 1950. Company A, 802nd EAB was the first Aviation Engineer unit to land in Korea. It sailed from Naha Port, Okinawa, on July 4 and started rehabilitating Pohang Airfield (K-3) for use by F-51s. They installed a 500-foot pierced steel plank (PSP) extension to the east end of the runway and constructed a 40-foot wide taxiway with 27 hardstands. In early August, they were forced to evacuate their equipment and were deployed as infantry to defend the base against advancing North Korean troops. Company A later received a Distinguished Unit Citation from the FEAF commander for its construction work and for defending the air base against North Korean forces.

Pierced steel plank (PSP) was developed and widely used in World War II and used extensively in Korea as the primary, expedient runway surfacing material in the early years of the war. By July 1953, nearly 30 million square feet of PSP had been used.

Corporal Don Wingate of Company A furnished this account:

We offloaded at a little village about 15 miles south of K-3 Airfield. We were a reinforced company with about double the official strength of an EAB company. We had a platoon of heavy equipment, a platoon of dump trucks, our own maintenance people, and the personnel with skills to build airfields. We had our own half-track with quad .50s on back and about triple the number of heavy automatic weapons. Our unit was strafed and bombed three times by Yak-9 aircraft while working on the strip in the early days of July 1950. When we were forced to withdraw in August 1950, we went to Pusan and worked on K-9 Airfield for about a month and then went back to K-3 at Pohang. The South African F-51s stationed at Pohang left and came back with us at the same time.

FEAF alerted other SCARWAF units on Okinawa for deployment to Korea. The 822nd EAB and the 919th Engineer Aviation Maintenance Company (EAMC) Contact Platoon were in Korea July 30 and began work on Taegu Airfield (K-2). They were ordered to repair the existing runway without hindering air operations; this runway was later designated Strip B. Then, working around the clock and aided by 500 Korean laborers, they started work on a new 5,000-foot PSP runway parallel to the existing runway, designated Strip A. On August 16, North Korean forces attacked Taegu, and the Aviation Engineers at K-2 were forced to evacuate to Pusan. Returning a month later, they completed the runway to a length of 5,700 feet, with an overrun of 1,000 feet. The pattern of coming under attack, retreating, having to abandon their work and then re-accomplish the same work once territory was regained was a source of constant frustration for the engineers.

By the end of 1950, the 930th EAG headquarters and the equivalent of three battalions, including the 811th EAB from Guam, were also deployed in Korea working on platoon- and company-sized projects.

A Tough First Year

In the 41 days between June 25 and August 4, 1950, United Nations Command (UNC) forces were driven back to a 140-mile perimeter west and north of Pusan on the southeast tip of the Korean peninsula. Initially, bad weather seriously hampered USAF close air support. However, North Korean supply lines quickly became

over-extended as enemy forces advanced, and as the weather improved heavy UNC air attacks significantly reduced the enemy forces' effectiveness. FEAF achieved air superiority, and UNC warships wiped out North Korean naval opposition and tightly blockaded the entire Korean coast.

With the Inchon Landing on September 15, 1950, by X Corps, and the Eighth Army breakout from the Pusan Perimeter during September 16-27, the Fifth Air Force commander decided the situation in Korea had turned around, and planning resumed to move additional air units to Korea. Before fighter-bomber groups could be based there, Fifth Air Force had to prepare a minimum of six airfields, a construction objective of major magnitude given the conditions there and lack of engineers available.

However, before additional engineers and tactical air units could be deployed, the Chinese Communists massed ground and air forces on the border north of the Yalu River. During the night of November 25, they began a massive attack. By the 28th, the UNC positions began to crumble.

Pyongyang was abandoned December 5, leaving 8,000 to 10,000 tons of supplies and equipment broken or burning inside the city. The 822nd EAB had been in the Pyongyang area rehabilitating two airfields, K-23 and K-24, for UNC air operations. When the order was given to withdraw they loaded all their equipment on rail flatcars, but the explosion of an ammunition freight car destroyed track and halted the withdrawal by train. The battalion had to destroy 75 percent of its equipment.

Company A, 802nd EAB, had been working in North Korea since October 1950. A reinforced platoon with a D-7 dozer, two dump trucks and a road grader was sent north from Hamhung West (K-28) and Yonpo (K-27) to keep the small field near Koto-Ri in operating condition. In early December, Company A pulled back from the Changjin Reservoir with the 1st Marine Division and evacuated to Pusan.

Corporal Don Wingate reported:
We left the village near Yonpo about the 7th of December 1950, and we carried a bunch of wounded Marines with us. We drove our equipment through Hamhung to the port at Hungnam and departed Hungnam for Pusan. We then went to Tsuiki Air Base in Japan for a while before deploying to K-13 Suwon by way of Inchon by ship. I believe we arrived at Suwon about a month before the rest of the unit arrived. All I can remember for sure is how cold it was in North Korea. We had to keep the equipment running all the time.

In mid-January, United Nations forces stopped the Chinese offensive south of Seoul. Eventually, a UNC offensive was sustained and by mid-June had pushed the enemy back to a line along and above the 38th Parallel. This line stayed about the same for the next two years. The static phase of the war had begun. With the Communist drive south contained and a fairly stable front line

A heavily sandbagged control tower overlooks the runway at Kimpo, which had to be repaired twice following North Korean and Chinese offensives against the airfield.

(Above) **1903rd EAB engineers haul rock from surrounding hills to be crushed for use in airfield and road construction. The greatest single day haul for the 1903rd as of March 1952 was 855 truckloads.**

(Below) **The 930th EAG was responsible for new construction and heavy maintenance on airfields in the southern part of Korea, while the 931st EAG performed similar duties in the Seoul-Suwon area.**

established, Air Force planners again put in motion the plan to upgrade and expand facilities to handle an increasing number of air units equipped with high-performance jet aircraft and newer transports.

Additional Deployments to Korea

The shortage of aviation engineers was impeding the ability to deploy tactical air units to Korea, and planners had the added concern that all new bases would have to be capable of bedding down jet fighters. The air war was exhausting the supply of F-51s and F-80s in the Air Force inventory, and the appearance of MiGs over Korea accelerated plans to bring the F-84 and F-86 into the conflict. In March 1951, the FEAF commander requested permission from the Air Force Chief of Staff to immediately convert Fifth Air Force to the new planes and requested five EABs and other supporting engineer units from the United States to build new airfields in Korea.

Air Staff directed FEAF to satisfy the request for additional aviation engineers by moving units stationed in Okinawa to Korea, turning their existing projects over to civilian contractors. In April and May 1951, the 931st EAG with its three battalions (802nd, 808th and 839th) and the remainder of the 919th EAMC moved to Korea. To increase the effectiveness of the SCARWAF battalions, their authorized strength was increased from 800 to 997 personnel in July 1951. By mid-1951, there were two EAG headquarters and more than five SCARWAF battalions working on air base projects in Korea. Additional units arrived from the United States later in the year. The 809th EAB and the 622nd EAMC arrived in September and the 1903rd EAB in November.

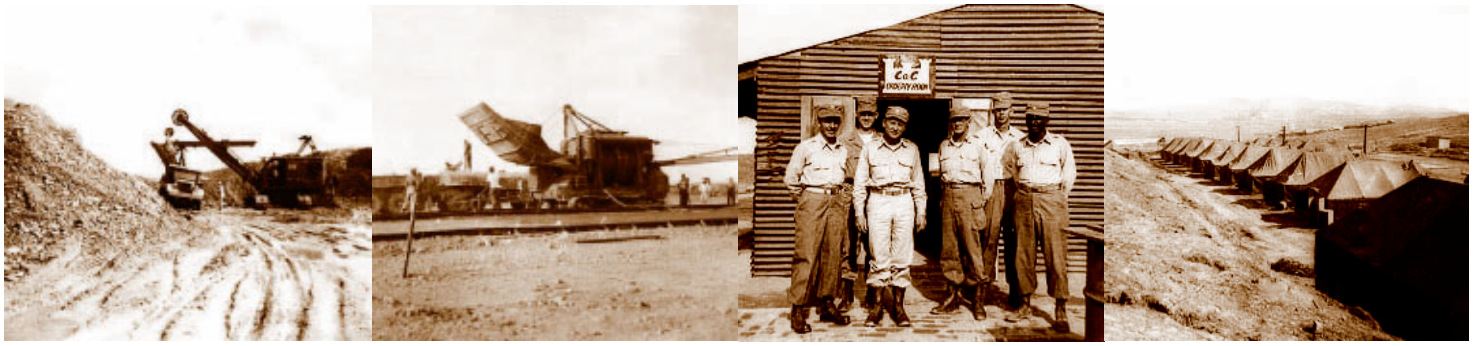
The 930th EAG was responsible for new construction and heavy maintenance at airfields in the southern part of Korea, while the 931st EAG performed similar duties in the Seoul-Suwon area. Engineers began construction of permanent bases with 9,000-foot concrete runways at Taegu, Kunsan and Suwon. Longer, smooth-surface runways not only reduced the safety risk for fighters but also saved on tires and damage to the aircraft structure. Jets needed to be based as far forward as possible to have more time over targets and to increase daily sortie rates.

Problems with terrain, soil conditions, personnel and equipment shortages delayed progress. Topographical conditions in Korea — mountains, numerous streams and rivers, and a high water table — made it difficult to find suitable flat land for new air bases. Inclement weather and primitive communications and transport infrastructure also presented significant engineering challenges for air base construction. Taegu was not completed until June 1952, and Kunsan, which had some of the worst soil and drainage conditions in Korea, was not completed until the fall of 1953.

K-55 Air Base

In mid-1951 Lt Col Robert Wood, 931st EAG, received a call from Fifth Air Force directing him to start site selection for a new air base for two jet fighter wings. The area he chose near the Osan-Suwon region was on the flood plain of the Chinwi-chon River, 8 miles south of Suwon and 38 miles south of Seoul. Occupying the site were four villages near the hillsides and a large number of rice paddies where the runway, taxiways and hardstands would be located. The villages of Jeuk-Bong-Ri, Chang-Deung-Ri, Shin-Ya-Ri and Ya-Ri were moved prior to starting construction. The village of Osan-ni remained near Route 1, also known as the main supply route, where the new base access road would be constructed.

On September 11, 1951, Fifth Air Force directed the 931st EAG to start constructing access roads and an aviation engineer campsite and motor pools. In November, the engineers began planning construction of a 9,000-foot concrete runway capable of handling jet fighters and modern transport aircraft. The paddy land had been drained and presented a dry surface. However, ground water was only 2-4 feet below the surface. The underlying soil to a depth of at least 15 feet was saturated clay and silt, which would not support construction



Snapshots provided by 1st Lt Fred Williamson *(second from left in third picture)* show the 839th EAB using power shovels to load gravel and rock into dump trucks for transporting to the rock crusher; loading crushed rock into a concrete mixer; officers of C Company, 839th EAB, in front of the company orderly room; and one of the rudimentary Army camps where aviation engineers lived. Camps were composed of squad-sized tents for enlisted personnel and metal buildings for company orderly rooms, battalion and group headquarters, officer quarters, mess halls and armories.

equipment. At least one D-8 Caterpillar tractor from the 839th EAB was lost, actually sunk, during the early phase of construction.

Companies A, B and C of the 839th EAB arrived incrementally at K-55 between December 1951 and June 1952. The condition of the main supply route, which was gravel and dirt in most places and one lane or less wide in each direction, made it difficult to deliver heavy equipment. A single rail line west of the road was used to bring in oversize equipment. Bulldozers cut a road from the supply route through the hills in the area that would later include the Main Gate. The hills were cleared and flattened to construct the engineer campsites and motor pools. A secondary benefit was the tons of dirt made available for road construction and for fill in the paddy areas.

The Chinwi-chon River ran parallel, north of the new runway, which meant constructing a system of dikes and drainage canals. Finding suitable rock for concrete aggregate and dirt for fill was a continuous problem. Unfortunately, much of the rock in the hills around the base was decomposed granite, which crumbled and was unsuitable for concrete aggregate. Company B set up a new rock crusher in a streambed 11 miles north of Suwon and established its company living area there, affectionately referred to as "The Boondocks." The 839th also set up and operated an asphalt plant brought from Okinawa.

The 839th became an integrated battalion prior to its deployment from Okinawa to Korea. It had been an all-black unit, except for officers, during World War II. White troops from other SCARWAF battalions on Okinawa were assigned to the unit prior to the Korean deployment and in subsequent replacements in Korea. The 811th and 822nd EABs were integrated in the same manner.

The master plan for Osan called for: a 9,000 x 150-foot concrete runway with overruns; a parallel concrete main taxiway with five connecting taxiways; two parking aprons; four diamond-shaped aircraft dispersal areas with 20 hardstands each; three maintenance aprons; a warehouse area; two cantonment areas with housing and headquarters for two air wings; a four-fuel POL system to support two wings of jet and conventional aircraft; a motor pool and bomb dump; a railroad line connecting to the main Osan-Pyongtaek line with two spurs; a road net to tie the installation together and provide access to anti-aircraft gun installations around the base; and the full range of utility systems and perimeter security installations.

Rare color photograph of civil engineers in Korea. Runway grading at K-55 (Osan AB), 1952.

In May 1952, command responsibility for all aviation engineer units in Korea was consolidated under the newly organized 417th Engineer Aviation Brigade Headquarters. Fifth Air Force continued to serve as the coordinator for construction projects and specified the requirements. On June 16, the 417th was directed to make construction of K-55 the highest priority.

To help pick up the pace, two reserve EABs (the 840th from Kingsport, TN, and the 841st from Miami, FL) were activated for service in Korea. They were subordinate to the 934th EAG, which was also activated from the Army Reserve in the Montana Military District. The 934th arrived at Inchon May 15, 1952, and picked up responsibility for the 839th EAB. Adequate troops, training and equipment for the two reserve battalions was a problem. The 841st, for example, had only 37 officers and NCOs as its initial cadre when it was called up for active duty.

F-94B jet fighters assigned to the 319th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron at Suwon AB fly over the partially completed runway and taxiway at Osan AB on the banks of the Chinwi-Chon River. *(Photo by Lt Robert W. Haller, courtesy Warren Thompson)*

Airfield construction started July 9, 1952, with two shifts. The typical work schedule was two 12-hour shifts, with one hour out of the 12 for equipment maintenance, seven days a week. Some SCARWAF units worked two 10-hour shifts with equipment maintenance between shifts. Availability of lighting equipment to support the night shifts was a problem. Equipment arrived after the project was underway, but there were never enough sets to adequately illuminate the project.

The 840th started runway paving August 10 with a 20-foot wide paver modified to lay a 25-foot concrete strip. Another modified concrete paver was put into operation August 15 by the 839th. Later, all three battalions were given various assignments on the runway and taxiways. The fill dirt, sand, base course rock and rock for concrete aggregate produced in the riverbed near Suwon were inadequate to keep up with the pace of construction. A quarry was established at Hill 170 to provide fill, a second rock crusher was put into operation at Hill 180, and sand was brought in from the Chinwi-chon River.

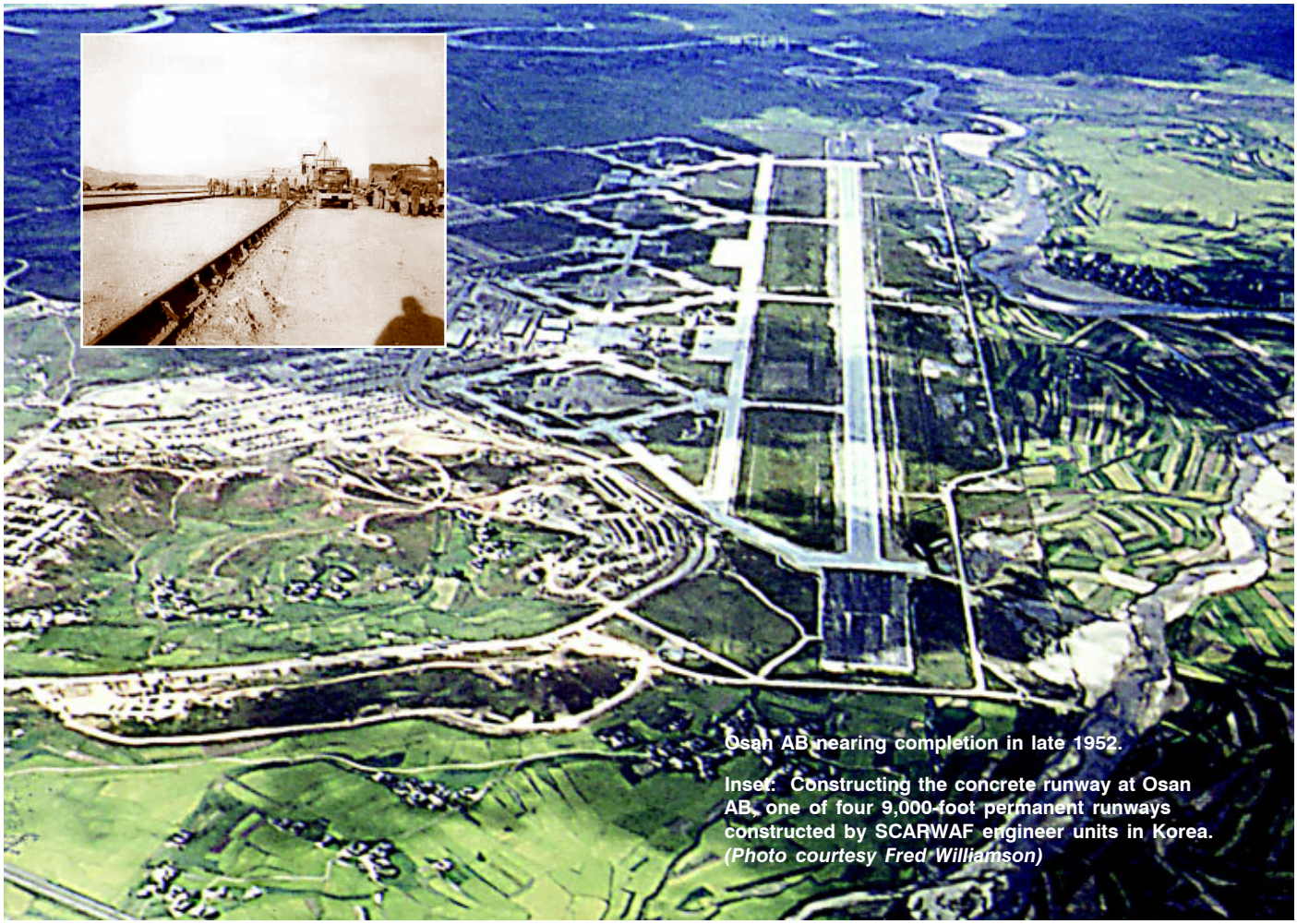
Inclement weather disrupted the schedule in mid-July when two weeks of rain caused the river to rise and flood into parts of the construction site. This turned the project and the motor pools into a quagmire so that heavy equipment could not work. Fill and sand had to be diverted from the project and used in the motor pools to create a firmer surface to support the weight of the heavy equipment. Two weeks of rain in mid-August and intermittently during the subsequent three months caused delays and increased the time required for concrete to dry. In November and December, cold weather set in and freezing temperatures created additional problems, especially for equipment operators.

Many personnel who worked on the runway and taxiways have stated that the concrete "floated" on the waterlogged, former paddy land. Although the area had been pumped dry before construction began, 1st Lt Fred Williamson, B Company commander, 839th EAB, tells the story of water "squishing" out from the sides of the runway when heavy aircraft landed.

In the end, K-55 was built faster than some bases were upgraded to concrete runways. The 18th Fighter-Bomber Wing (FBW) was the first unit assigned to K-55. The wing commander, Col Frank Perego, faced significant challenges overseeing the transition from F-51 to F-86 aircraft and the move from Chinhae to the new base still under construction. The 18th moved to Osan on December 26, and the first three F-86s arrived on base on January 28. The 18th FBW flew its first F-86 combat mission on February 25.

B Company commander with the 841st, Capt Ed McManus, furnished personal insights on the construction at K-55:

We had just about everything drop in. Our first customer was a Marine F9F from MAG 33 at Pyongtaek that made an emergency wheels-up landing in the July timeframe when the runway was under construction. Our big problems were the water table, flooding from the river north of the runway, spare parts, operator training (heavy on OJT and hard on equipment maintenance), supply of construction materials, light sets/generators for night operations, and weather conditions — monsoon rains, heat and cold. My big problems at the quarry were the loss of drill steel rods due to the granite fissures, explosives availability, replacement engine and jaws for the 150-ton primary crusher unit. We wore that baby out with continuous two 10-hour shifts per day. My dynamite came from Japan, when it came. I got a boxcar of frozen dynamite that we had to



Osan AB nearing completion in late 1952.

Inset: Constructing the concrete runway at Osan AB, one of four 9,000-foot permanent runways constructed by SCARWAF engineer units in Korea. ***(Photo courtesy Fred Williamson)***

defrost, a dangerous operation. My demo people, unlike the USAF EOD/bomb people, were not authorized demolition pay, and we blasted every day. When we ran out of dynamite we resorted to the use of black powder and C-4 demolition blocks scrounged from the Army.

Statistics compiled by the 417th Brigade during the course of the construction showed the engineers moved more than 325,000 cubic yards (CYs) of earth, unloaded and used 59 railroad cars of cement and 104 railroad cars of asphalt; hauled 136,470 CYs of base course material, 148,053 CYs of sand, and 549,923 CYs of fill; and poured 93,650 CYs of concrete.

The military armistice agreement at Panmunjom was signed at 10 a.m. July 27, 1953. Work on K-55 continued for the next two years by aviation engineers. The 839th EAB was the last SCARWAF unit to leave K-55 when the battalion was inactivated May 1, 1956.

K-55 was designated Osan AB in September 1956. The base transitioned to standby status and hosted only temporary duty or transient units involved in PACAF tactical operations. Concrete surfaces were restored in 1957, and total renovation projects were completed in 1958 when the base became a permanent installation. Upgrades to strengthen the runways and taxiways,

Members of the 811th EAB barely take notice of a C-46 Commando coming in for a landing as they work on a runway overrun.

Runways in Korea went into operation as quickly as aviation engineers could pave them. A B-26 light bomber taxis alongside grading equipment operated by the 808th EAB.

concrete resurfacing and reconstruction to the flight operations areas have been accomplished from time to time over the years, but the flightline layout, taxiways and aircraft dispersal areas remain essentially the same as they were when the base was built in 1952. This is a tremendous tribute to the work of the aviation engineers, whose original task was to design and quickly build a wartime airfield that could be used for five years.

SCARWAF Effectiveness

Aviation engineers in SCARWAF units accomplished impressive construction feats during the Korean War, even though the odds were stacked against them and the quality and timeliness of their work were sometimes criticized.

During the first year of the war, most units were under strength and personnel were often poorly trained and inexperienced. This was reflected in their accomplishments. Air Force leaders lamented that "no single factor so seriously handicapped Fifth Air Force operational capabilities as the lack of adequate air facilities." They complained that "operations from short and rough runways damaged and deteriorated combat aircraft, posing inordinate maintenance, supply and attrition burdens upon the combat wings and tactical air forces." Given what the engineers had to work with in the early days of the conflict, that wasn't surprising.

Some of the equipment used by Regular Army SCARWAF units that had been overseas since the end of World War II was obsolete and worn out, and in many cases there were no readily available spare parts. The hasty construction techniques and materials engineers were forced to use at the beginning of the war sometimes came back to haunt them. PSP that was laid on a poorly prepared base, for instance, was almost impossible to keep repaired. In May 1951, the PSP runways at Taegu

Trucks use a self-propelled conveyor loader to remove the curing sand from a 9,000-foot runway completed by the 930th EAG.

literally disintegrated under the pounding of 10,000 landings and takeoffs per month. The three groups of F-80s stationed there had to relocate to other bases.

Setbacks in fighting forced the engineers to complete work more than once. The runway at Kimpo had to be repaired twice; first after the North Koreans were driven back in the fall of 1950, then after fighting in the Seoul area during the Chinese offensive. American B-29s bombed the runway so the enemy could not use it. More than 40 bomb craters had to be filled, the runway resurfaced and buildings repaired. Suwon also required extensive repairs due to the same battles that damaged Kimpo.

Early problems with poorly trained engineers were remedied with the arrival of replacement personnel and additional units that had gone through engineer training at Ft. Belvoir, VA, and Fort Leonard Wood, MO. They were short of modern equipment, however, and problems due to lack of spare parts and logistics support were never solved.

Some units, especially the Reserve SCARWAF battalions that arrived in mid-1952, were issued new equipment, but there was no time to put in place an adequate pipeline of spare parts and technical manuals. In-commission rates of vital equipment sometimes reached as low as 15 percent. The double shifts the engineers worked also took a toll on equipment. In addition, the number of maintenance personnel needed to support the two-shift operation never kept pace with operational needs.

KOREAN SERVICE MEDAL

Executive Order No. 10179, November 8, 1950, established the Korean Service Medal. Members of the armed forces are authorized to wear the Korean Service Medal if they participated in combat or served with a combat or service unit in the Korean Theater on permanent assignment or on temporary duty for 30 consecutive or 60 nonconsecutive days between June 27, 1950, and July 27, 1954. The medal features an embossed gateway encircled with the inscription "Korean Service." Centered on the reverse side is the Korean symbol that represents the unity of all beings, as it appears on the national flag of the Republic of Korea. Encircling the symbol is the inscription "United States of America." A spray of oak and laurel graces the bottom edge.

Aerial view of the Osan front gate and 839th EAB areas, from a Bell helicopter spring 1953. (*Photo courtesy Duane Pfister*)

Aviation engineer units stepped up to the many challenges facing them, though, and by the end of the war their work was described as "remarkable." When the war started, there were only three operating air bases in Korea — Taegu, Pohang and Pusan. By the end of the war, one engineer aviation brigade, three groups, 10 battalions and three separate companies had seen action in Korea. They had built or repaired 55 separate airfields, including some in North Korea, from which the Air Force flew nearly 700,000 sorties. They also worked on a number of other airfields, including some used by U.S. Marine air units, and they built the new K-55 Air Base in a record six months.

Osan and Kunsan Today

Today Osan AB is the primary USAF base in the northern part of the Republic of Korea, serving as home for Seventh Air Force and the 51st Fighter Wing. The 51st flies F-16 C/D, A/OA-10A, and C-12J aircraft. Other units and aircraft operating on the base include U-2 operations flown by the 5th Reconnaissance Squadron and search and rescue missions flown by Det 1, 33rd Rescue Squadron. Kunsan AB is home to the 8th Fighter Wing flying F-16 C/D aircraft.

Principal civil engineer forces in Korea today are the 51st Civil Engineer Squadron at Osan, the 8th CES at Kunsan and the 554th RED HORSE Squadron at Osan.

Don Tomajan was assigned to K-55 with the 839th EAB Headquarters & Service Company as a heavy equipment mechanic and operator from November 1954 to April 1955, and served with B Company, 808th EAB at Naha Air Base, Okinawa, from April 1955 to April 1956. His last assignment on active duty was with the 103rd Engineer Company, Heavy Equipment, at Ft. Leonard Wood, MO. From 1963-1968, he worked as a South Vietnam Current Intelligence Analyst, Defense Intelligence Agency. From 1968 to present he has worked for IBM Federal Systems, Loral Federal Systems, and Lockheed Martin.

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